

CHRISTIANITY AND THE WORLD SITUATION¹

Ephesians V, 16—"Redeeming the time because the days are evil."

THESE words were written by an elderly man to those who were his children in the faith. He speaks of himself as an ambassador in bonds. After a gallant attempt to present to a world that was in dire need of help what he considered to be the gospel of God's power for salvation, he found himself bound with chains and confined to a prison. These words, however, do not represent the pessimism which too often characterizes those of us who are reaching the ends of our careers and who somehow feel that present conditions and the prospects of the future are not what they were in the days of our youth. Nor do these words express the disillusionment that comes to those, the high hopes of whose youth have ended in failure and disappointment. They rather express the faith of a man who sees that, however gloomy the prospect may seem to be from the human point of view, God, nevertheless, is able through what St. Paul calls "God's redeeming activity" to take even the failures that have resulted from our human errors and transform them into opportunities for further advance towards the establishment of God's kingdom here on earth. And so it seems to me that at a time like the present when it is obvious that the days are

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evil, when, even more than in St. Paul's time, the forces of evil seem to be victorious over the forces of good, it seems fitting that we should ask ourselves why it was that Paul, the ambassador of God in bonds, was able to preserve his conviction that in God there was a power that was capable of redeeming the time, of finding, amid circumstances which to our human vision seem adverse to any progress, an opportunity to use our human failures as the very means by which mankind would be led on not only to a new advance but to the attainment of a level which was higher than anything we had known in the past.

The words of St. Paul in the English translation perhaps do not bring out his full meaning. There are two words in the Greek language which are used and translated "time" in our Bible. One word we use when time is thought of as mere succession, as the dating of a particular event, but the other word, which is used frequently by St. Paul and other New Testament writers, means not merely time in the sense of succession but it means "the allotted time," it means the period of time in which God has purposed to accomplish a certain result. In other words, from the Christian point of view, time does not mean simply that one event follows another event according to the law of cause and effect—that what we are today is the inevitable result of what we were yesterday. That is not the Christian idea of time. The Christian idea of time is that it is under the control of God; that in each period of time God has a purpose to fulfill, and that while we, through our indifference or even our opposition to God, sometimes seem to make it impossible for that purpose to be realized, still God perseveres. While He does not destroy our freedom, while He does not bring His infinite power to bear upon us with such compelling force that, like the inanimate objects of nature, we are compelled to do His

will, yet God, without destroying our freedom, does guide it, and when in our freedom we make mistakes that seem to place obstructions in the way of the realization of God's purpose, God uses this thing that St. Paul calls "His redeeming activity" to transform our human errors into opportunities for fulfilling God's purpose in the allotted time.

St. Paul was a realist. He recognized that the days were evil. And after all, Christianity does not represent that shallow optimism which refuses to recognize the significance of evil in the world. Christianity is not that kind of optimism which Voltaire lightly ridiculed, that somehow all things are going to turn out for the best in this, the best of all possible worlds. Christianity does not simply say that somehow, no matter what we do, all things are going to work together for good. St. Paul does use that form of expression, but he says, "All things work together for good to them that love God, to those who are called according to God's purpose." In other words, our Christian faith, our Christian optimism, our Christian refusal to accept the verdict, "The days are evil," as the ultimate annihilation of our hopes, is based not simply upon our belief that there is a power of God that is able to overrule our human obstinacy and our human errors, but it is based rather upon the faith that all things work together for good according to God's purpose on the condition that we ourselves have love and loyalty toward God, a love and a loyalty which enable us to respond to God's call and dedicate ourselves in service in order that his purpose may be realized. And so St. Paul, in writing to his new converts, does not simply say, "Don't be discouraged because the days are evil, for there is a God in Heaven who is able to overcome and overrule all the plans and the machinations of the evil ones of the world," but St. Paul urges his converts to cooperate with God in this redeeming activity. He says to them,

"Bestir yourselves to redeem the time because the days are evil." The very fact that the days are evil indicates to St. Paul that the time, the opportunity, has come for the exercise of God's redeeming activity.

That is what the Christian Cross means, does it not? The Christian Cross means that God does not consider man's failure to respond to the obligations which God has placed upon him as the final annihilation of God's purpose. God does not feel that man's failure to use his freedom wisely involves the taking away from man of the gift of freedom. How frequently that is our human solution of the troubles which arise from a misuse of freedom. We deprive those who have misused their freedom of any further exercise of it. But the Christian Cross manifests to us the great truth that God does not pursue either one of these two courses. God does not say, "Well, I have done my best. The human race is a hopeless lot of beings. Let them (to use a slang expression) stew in their own juice." God does not say that "This freedom with which I have endowed mankind is obviously too dangerous a gift, and because man has misused it, because experience demonstrates that to bestow freedom upon those who are subject to the temptations of life in the world, or those who have not had experience to learn how freedom should be used, is too dangerous; therefore I will withdraw that gift of freedom and I will confine man to the status of those who are compelled by force to follow the lines of the divine purpose." God did not pursue either one of those two courses but he sent his Son into the world to redeem the world. And "to redeem the world" means that the Lord Jesus Christ, by the application of all the effort of which He was capable and by the willingness to endure the sacrifice which was necessary in order to repair the situation, in order to compensate, as it were, for the evil results that had been produced through our

Christianity and World Situation 177

mistakes, our errors, our sins, Jesus Christ took the very condition which from our human point of view seems to reduce us to one of two alternatives, and out of that condition, by God's redeeming activity, by bringing the divine love to bear upon our human problems—a love which acquired redeeming efficacy because it was perfectly ready to pass through the baptism of sacrifice—Christ made that very Cross which on the one hand is the symbol of the absolute failure of God's children, also to be the symbol of God's ability to take our failures and out of them to produce new opportunities, to hold before men the open door that leads to a new advance.

Now for a great many years this doctrine of the redeeming activity of God, this doctrine which St. Paul emphasized in all of his letters—St. Paul lived in a day which like our own was an evil day—this doctrine of the redeeming activity of God has largely fallen out of notice even in Christian countries. You know the nineteenth century was a century of tremendous progress. It was a century in which mankind, through the application of scientific knowledge to material resources was accomplishing such marvelous results, was, by its own efforts, overcoming so many difficulties, solving so many of the problems of life, that somehow we were led to believe that man was able to build up that kingdom for which he has been striving through the ages without any particular dependence upon God. And so it is not strange that this Christian teaching of God's redeeming activity, this recognition of the fact that through our misuse of our freedom we are constantly coming to a point where the situation would be absolutely hopeless unless God came in and through his redeeming activity restored to us the opportunity which we have lost, that this doctrine has dropped not only out of the consciousness of people who ordinarily are indifferent to God but it has dropped out to a large ex-

tent—it did drop out—from the teachings of the Christian Church.

There is very little emphasis on the doctrine of God's redeeming activity in the theology of the latter half of the nineteenth century and of the first part of the twentieth century. And yet it does seem to me that after twenty-five years of grievous experiences we have come to a point where, like St. Paul, we are bound to cry out, "The days are evil." It does not mean that we have the pessimism of old age; it does not mean that we are people who are unduly alarmed; but it does mean that to everyone who thinks realistically the conditions which we see around us in the world today are evil conditions. They are conditions in which evil seems to be triumphing over good. They are conditions in which the ideals which we have cherished seem to be less effective than that way of life upon which we have been accustomed to pour our scorn and contempt. The very things that we have opposed and from which we have been trying to deliver men seem today to be not only triumphing but seem to be effecting purposes much better than is done by those who are still loyal to the old ideals, to that Christian way of life which we had thought so securely founded.

So this is a time when we have got to ask ourselves the question, "What can be done about it?" We cannot simply sit still and hope that God is going to intervene in some way and correct our mistakes for us. It is all right to pray to God for victory of the good, but let us remember that the chief, the most essential principle that Christ has taught us in regard to prayer is that while the faithful can absolutely expect God to answer prayer, God's answer to prayer does not come to us as a ready-made product tied up, as it were, in a parcel and placed on the table before us. God answers our prayers by opening to us an opportunity in which, if we are

willing to cooperate with God, if we are willing to expend the proper amount of effort and to yield ourselves to the proper degree of sacrifice, God opens up an opportunity that through our cooperation, our energetic cooperation, our sacrificial cooperation, the purpose for which we pray may be realized.

Therefore, as we face the present situation, as we see evil triumphing over good, let us not make the mistake of simply saying that we ought to pray to God and then sit down quietly and expect God to work some marvel in a way that we cannot comprehend, in a way that is utterly beyond our power, which is going to rescue the world from those enemies of the good that today seem to be enthroned in so many spheres of human activity and human society. But let us remember that when we pray to God, when we trust that God is going to save us from this present situation, the condition upon which God can do that is that we ourselves shall cooperate with God. St. Paul does not say to the Ephesians, "The days are evil, but do not be troubled because there is a God in Heaven and you can trust Him to save you." He says to the Ephesians, "Redeem the time. Join with God in this redeeming activity." Look at the Cross. What does the Cross mean? The Cross means using to the utmost the capacities which God has given one. The Cross means placing upon the altar of sacrifice everything that God has bestowed upon us, everything that we consider precious. What is the most precious thing that has ever been produced in the course of human history? Perhaps nearly all agree that it was the personality, the character of the Lord Jesus Christ. And what did Christ find to be the most effective way of using that personality? He did not put it in a case in order to protect it from harm, that all men might come and gaze upon it with admiration. He placed that life upon the altar of sacrifice. He said, "I, if I be lifted up . . . , will draw all men unto

me." Christ realized, and that is the thing that we ourselves have got to realize, that even the infinite power of God is not able to save mankind from the results of its sins and at the same time preserve for mankind the gift of freedom, except through sacrifice.

It was only in sacrifice that God's power, it was only in sacrifice that God's love acquired that redeeming efficacy which makes it adequate to carry out God's purpose for mankind here on earth. And I think that there is nothing that we need to realize more at the present time. We oppose the forces of evil with force, and we ask God to reinforce our power in order that our power may be greater than the power of those to whom we are opposed. But let us remember that just as the Lord Jesus Christ found it necessary to place Himself upon the altar of sacrifice even though He might have called upon the infinite power of God, so should we ourselves. We can build up our army and our navy and can increase our planes—those things are a part of our cooperation with God perhaps—but let us remember that the victory of the good in this world depends upon the willingness of the adherents of good causes to give the same amount of effort and the same amount of sacrifice and the same amount of enthusiasm to a good cause which is being given to bad causes by their adherents. God is not going to use His power to make good causes triumph if the supporters of those good causes themselves are indifferent, if they refuse to sacrifice themselves. We know, those of us who have had practical experience, that in any enterprise to be carried on in this earth the absolute requisites for success are adequate effort and adequate sacrifice.

There are certain groups of people who have become disillusioned with regard to the effectiveness of what we call our democratic institutions, and I think it is significant that, at

least, for example, in Germany, the support which is given to the Nazi cause is largely the enthusiastic adherence of the younger people of Germany to that cause. Now how do we explain that? Is it not because this younger generation of that very virile race found, under what we may call the democratic régime which we try to make prevail in the world, that there was no opportunity for them to use their capacities for any worth-while ends, and therefore when somebody came along and pointed to them an open door of opportunity, and said, "If you are willing to throw to one side these outworn inhibitions which you call Christian ideals, all these vain things which we have been proclaiming for centuries as democratic institutions, if you will throw them into the discard and follow a method which our human impulses suggest to us, I will lead you through the door of opportunity to the quick realization of those things which your natures yearn for." And was it strange that these young people, whose hearts were yearning for the opportunities to use their capacities for worthy ends, should have listened, as men have so often listened in the past, to the plausible voice of one who offers to them an opportunity that the adherents' loyalty to the old ideals seems to withhold from them?

Now these men are throwing into this cause a tremendous amount of sacrifice, a tremendous amount of enthusiasm. I read a very interesting article in an English magazine just a few days ago, and I should like to quote from it here because it does seem to me to express some of the points which are necessary in this present situation. This writer says, "The vital warmth at the heart of a civilization is what we call its religion. Religion is the passion which inspires a society to persevere in a certain way of life and to obey the rules which define it. Without the conviction that this way of life is a thing of absolute value and that its rules must be obeyed at

all costs, the rules become dead letters and the way of life a thing of the past. The civilization dies because the people to whom it belonged have lost faith in it. They no longer have a religious sense of its rules as things which at all costs must be obeyed. Obedience degenerates into habit and by degrees the habit withers away."

It seems to be that this is a very correct diagnosis of the disease which is producing such terrible results in the world of today. What we call our democratic institutions, what we call our Christian ideals, justice, liberty, peace—all the things that Christ has taught us to cherish—derive their origin from the Christian religion, from that faith in God which Christ brought into the world. And yet in the past hundred years or so men have attempted to abstract these fruits of Christian religion from the religion itself, to put them before mankind simply as rational principles for human action. Now it is a law that we should have learned long ago in experience that no matter how rational a principle may be, unless it also is a principle which stirs our emotions, which stirs up in us that emotional energy without which the reason is never able to move the human will to action, that such a presentation of principles is utterly ineffective. And is not that just what has happened to our Christian civilization? We have abstracted our ideals from the religion from which they were derived. We have attempted to put them before men merely as rational principles of action. We have lost any source to which we can go and obtain that emotional energy without which the human will cannot be persuaded to move. In other words, our democratic people are indifferent with regard to their beliefs, with regard to what they call their ideals, as compared to those people who are opposing democracy. We are unwilling to throw ourselves into our cause with the same energy or with the same united loyalty

or with the same degree of sacrifice manifested by the Germans, the Japanese, the people of other totalitarian states. Is it not obvious that the difficulty that we are meeting at the present time is due to the fact that our ideals have been divorced from that religion which gave them birth and that love of God, that loyalty to God which was the store from which we could draw the emotional energy necessary to give to our will the divine power to make these ideals effective?

And so it seems to me that you of the graduating class, upon whose shoulders falls the responsibility for dealing with what we call an evil age, must be among those who are bent on so transforming this age that the future may be not only better than the evil present, but even better than what we call the good ages of the past. And if you are going to meet with success in this undertaking, if there is any prospect of producing a good or a better world out of the evil world which we see around us, the only condition upon which there seems to us to be any hope is that we should bring together in intimate union the two things which for so long a period have been divorced: upon our Christian ideals and our democratic principles we should bring to bear that emotional energy which is stirred up by love and loyalty, by faith in a God whose activities have in them the redemptive power. We should once more remember that after all man is dependent upon God. Man was placed in this world not to the end that by himself, through a process of automatic development, he would gradually be led along to the Kingdom of Heaven, but God purposely placed man in a world which, apart from God, always leads man to evil ends, and man was so placed because God wished for man's own happiness and for his welfare that this task which He had assigned to man should be a task which can be carried out only in cooperation with God.

The conditions and the circumstances of life, what we call the trends that move in human history, and what we call the spirit of the age, are but the raw materials which in themselves can lead man to no good end. Like all raw materials they need to be fashioned and moulded, not only by the product of our minds, but by the energetic effort derived from our love for God and from our trust in God. Upon these raw materials we need to bring to bear the redeeming activity of God acting by and through ourselves. And the promise of the New Testament is that if we are willing to make ourselves channels through which the redeeming activity of God can work, if we are willing to be crucified with Christ, to join Him not only in the supreme effort which He made but to join Him in the supreme sacrifice which He offered, the promise is that our generation, your generation or any generation, no matter how gloomy the prospect by which it may be faced, is adequate to do what Christ did, to take what from our human level seems to be absolute calamity and to transform it into the means by which a new door of opportunity shall be opened and men may be led along the road of progress to a higher level of achievement than ever has been known before.

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